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## **Ethnicity and labour in Mauritius: assessing a cinematic account**

### **Abstract**

*We assess the sole substantial film documenting the history of socio-economic relations in Mauritius, a history stamped by long experiences of slavery and bonded labour. We argue that it represents an important crystallisation of a triumphalist ethnic interpretation of Mauritian history. We show the filmic devices used to underline the ethnic narrative and the marginalisation of slave descendants' voices. We demonstrate that the film ignores the early and strong development of values of equity across racial groups. It obscures the linked creation of a significant labour movement and its contribution to Mauritian society in securing the degree of equitable success which the film makers celebrate.*

**Keywords:** Mauritius; labour history; film; slavery; bonded labour.

“Audiences appreciate the fact something really happened, and they’ll wonder after they see the film whether it got the story right.” (Natalie Zemon Davis) <sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

We analyse the recent documentary film *From Girmitiya* (bonded labourers – authors) *to Government: The Story of Indians in Mauritius*, which relates the rise of ethnic Indians in Mauritius. It appears in a series of ten Indian government-commissioned films about the Indian diaspora under the *Bridging Worlds* rubric. The film has been a popular one in that series and has been available on YouTube via the “Indian Diplomacy” channel since September 2012. It has received over 8,000 YouTube views at the time of writing. The film’s account is consistent both with those of the Mauritian government and with local Indians’ predominant self-image as hard-working, well-educated and prudent, conversely implying the absence of such virtues in the large Creole minority.<sup>2</sup> Given the film’s status as the most visible, professionally-produced documentary concerning Mauritius, a country whose history has been marked by significant experiences of slavery and bonded labour, its viewpoint and techniques have significance. It appears in a context of increasing efforts by Indian governments to extend their influence among and beyond the Indian diaspora.<sup>3</sup>

The film presents a version of current reality and history that buttresses the position of an Indian elite within Mauritius’s governing class and is filmic history in the service of the powerful. It portrays the majority ethnic group as

having driven national success through their personal virtues and merits. This perspective displaces other major factors in the island's success and neglects the continued, substantial afflictions of a large group of slave descendants. It ignores the contribution made by the trade unions in building a social democratic welfare state with a lively democratic life. Following Natalie Zemon Davis' recommendation, we compare the film with scholarly accounts.<sup>4</sup> The island has indeed achieved considerable socio-economic success since independence, with sustained economic progress, economic diversification, high levels of growth in Gross Domestic Product, and high rates of expansion of its per capita income.<sup>5</sup> However, economic development does not necessarily bring equitable distribution of the national income, to a socially acceptable welfare net nor to a vibrant democracy, all features which have long been markedly absent in many African countries.<sup>6</sup> In the Mauritian case, some wider benefits have been secured by a non-ethnic trade union movement, organically linked to all political parties. This movement reflects popular values developed through long-term experiences across generations and crucially (despite real differences), across those from different ethnic backgrounds.

### **Mauritian History: the ethnic account**

Mauritius may be the most ethnically diverse country on Earth.<sup>7</sup> Ethnic groupings, although they have some analytic utility, are blurred due to

considerable admixture between them.<sup>8</sup> Slaves came from a wide range of areas and ethnicities but were predominantly African in origin, though importantly a sizeable minority were Indian.<sup>9</sup> The island's diversity partly arises from its colonial history, as it was colonised by three European countries. For a period in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century it was ruled by the Netherlands' East India Company; France colonised Mauritius down to 1810 and was succeeded by Britain (1810-1968). The British, permitted the land and slave-owning Franco-Mauritians to retain their dominant position in the island's economy and polity. The slave-owning elite included some rich Indians.<sup>10</sup> The extent of the colonial powers' responsibilities for presiding over, legitimating and facilitating first slavery and then bonded labour has been well documented.<sup>11</sup> After the British abolished slavery, both it and the slave trade continued for decades in the adjacent French empire. Ex-slaves virtually disappeared from Mauritian plantations post-abolition.<sup>12</sup> The British authorities therefore helped the Franco-Mauritian to increase the pre-existing importation of Indian and-again importantly-African bonded labourers.<sup>13</sup> They thereby massively expanded what reformist Victorians polemically argued was a "new system of slavery": bonded labour.<sup>14</sup> The bonded labourers were the "Girmitiya" of the film's title.

The tiny Franco-Mauritian elite remains economically central as a significant provider of investment.<sup>15</sup> Today they govern in alliance with a much larger

group, the Indian descendants of slaves and bonded labourers, led by the Indian elite.<sup>16</sup> The latter drove the independence movement which had less than overwhelming support as many feared that Indian rule would reduce minority rights.<sup>17</sup> The subsequent narrative developed by the political elite to manage ethnic tensions and maintain stability while attracting foreign direct investment became one of national unity in ethnic and religious diversity.<sup>18</sup> Recently, the state attempted to further this account through establishing the Mauritian Truth and Justice Commission, whose explicit aim was to further national unity while acknowledging the damaging legacies of slavery and bonded labour.<sup>19</sup> The account stresses Indian virtues while tacitly implying that the Creoles lacked them, thereby proffering an “explanation” for their position which in turn afflicts the slaves’ descendants.<sup>20</sup>

Numerous reasons exist to question this account of national cohesion. There have been many “losers” post-independence; the Indian majority has indeed come to dominate politics. Slave descendants were recently estimated by the Mauritian Truth and Justice Commission to represent 25% of the population.<sup>21</sup> They are often referred to as “Creoles”, a problematic term because in the Nineteenth Century it was applied to Franco-Mauritians and because slave descendants are ethnically diverse.<sup>22</sup> Their economic and social position is extremely poor.<sup>23</sup> A sense of stigma and exclusion, extensive illiteracy, high rates of unemployment, morbidity and mortality were confirmed by the

Mauritian Truth and Justice Commission's voluminous, extensively researched report. They experience their ancestors' slavery as a "taint" on themselves.<sup>24</sup> There have been numerous episodes of Creole protest. In 1999, a three-day period of rioting by Creoles erupted in response to the death in obscure circumstances of a popular Creole musician at the hands of the Indian-dominated police. The disturbances were followed by a savage ethnic backlash through "pogroms" against the Creoles.<sup>25</sup>

We offer a critical analysis of the film, operating at two levels: first, we analyse the film and its techniques. Next, we propose an alternative account which shows how the filmic narrative is both partial and inadequate.

## **Method and Approach**

We analyse the film's technique to determine how it uses cinematic devices. We draw on approaches and techniques that historians and film scholars have suggested to interrogate cinematic approaches to history. The film harnesses historical events to a political purpose, positioning it as a "social issue documentary."<sup>26</sup> However, it may also be described as an historical documentary.<sup>27</sup> Carl Plantinga identifies an "assertive stance" as a common aspect of non-fiction cinema in general, and David Ludvigsson specifically suggests that this is a marked feature of certain historical documentaries.<sup>28</sup> As Robert A. Rosenstone suggests, historical documentaries often incorporate images which are more "proximate than literal realities". Rosenstone further

argues that an historical documentary may legitimately utilise cinema's manipulative power to create a certain type of "imaginative" account.<sup>29</sup> Davis offers a different emphasis however, since she insists on the prime importance of not doing violence to historical scholarship while pursuing a filmic argument.<sup>30</sup>

We draw on all of these authors' suggested techniques for analysis of this type of film. Plantinga and Nichols offer specific detailed direction on the types of cinematic techniques often deployed in documentaries of all types, which we use.<sup>31</sup> As Davis suggests, we investigated the biographies of the film's respondents.<sup>32</sup> We also use Davis' approach to analysis of films specifically depicting slavery, when she identifies a filmic vocabulary of slavery.<sup>33</sup> In the second stage of analysis we follow her broader perspective advocating strong respect for scholarly accounts.<sup>34</sup> We offer an alternative account of Mauritian history based on the extensive corpus of publication available in European languages, informed by our own research in British and Mauritian public archives.

### **Filmic Analysis**

The film combines techniques to show that the Indian journey has been highly successful and that this success benefited the island's other communities. Three central devices are used: images overlaid with voiceover; a sequence of three historical reconstructions and interviews.



### *(1) Voiceover and imagery*

The voiceover is the film's narrative tissue, linking scenes and connecting different sections and their imagery while advancing the over-arching narrative. It works in concert with a blend of visual motifs, colour schemes and editing techniques. The visual language of cinema is used to bring history to life at a fast pace, that audiences are less likely to question closely.

The voiceover establishes conflicts or crises, after which interviews or images explain how issues were resolved. The voiceover establishes first the Indian struggle to survive in the harsh circumstances of 19<sup>th</sup> century servitude, and then the subsequent battle with forces who tried to suppress and deny Indian culture. The film's narration distils complex historical processes. When the film establishes the social *status quo* in contemporary Mauritius, the voiceover tells us that "Mauritius today is a multi-racial society with a place for everyone". Perhaps to distract us from asking how this occurred, the film's visuals keep the current narrative rooted firmly in the present. This is done by footage of school children performing a dance incorporating aspects of both Indian and African culture. This charming image illustrates the process of cultural borrowings between the island's inhabitants. More subtly, the sight of smiling Indian children at school is a first illustration of a claimed central virtue of Indian Mauritians: commitment to education. The beginnings of this idea thus planted in the audience's mind, the narrator briefly returns to history and suggests that

“increasing wealth meant increasing levels of education.” Education, we are told, enabled Mauritian Indians to “rethink the *status quo*,” leading to the independence movement. These ideas are illustrated cinematographically as we meet the Organisation for Diaspora Initiatives, a group “formed to promote Mauritius’s mixed culture.” We see this mixed race group as members sit in the garden of a colonial house conversing in Mauritian Creole. The film now connects education with racial harmony as the voiceover tells us that “most Mauritians” speak three languages: Creole, French and English. Indian, Chinese and Franco-Mauritians all comment on the benefits of multiculturalism. We go from here to the decision of Mauritius’s first independent government to make education free. “Today Mauritius has universal literacy,” the voiceover exaggeratedly contends, arguing that education, together with the resultant “educated youth,” is fostering the country’s “strong economy.”

The process by which the journey “from Girmitiya to government” proceeded is described in general terms. The voiceover: “Surprisingly, the way out of poverty for many Indians was tied to sugar.” The film thereby begins to introduce another of its central Indian Mauritian virtues: hard work and entrepreneurial spirit. Following images of the Aapravasi Ghat, Port Louis’s immigration depot where bonded labourers disembarked, Indians are depicted simultaneously as individuals and as part of a collective when pages of

numbered ‘mug shots’ of individual bonded labourers are shown. These photographs, taken by the office of the imperial Protector of Immigrants, remind us of the individuality and humanity of those transported. The haunting images also provide a connection with a figure who will prove important in the film, Mauritian novelist Abhimanyu Unnuth (see below): the same photographs are used on the dust jacket for a 2001 French edition of his book *Sueurs de Sang* (*Sweating Blood*) about bonded labourers; here as in his interview, the filmmakers create an intertextual loop by which the documentary and the book reinforce one another’s message.

Finally, the voiceover summarises. The result of the struggle for recognition and empowerment, is a unique cultural identity. “Mauritius is no mere facsimile of India,” the voiceover asserts. The voiceover summarises this defiant preservation of identity with the contention that “Mauritian Indians have achieved the impossible.” The film’s final images are of Mauritians going about their day. These, like many others, are shot from a distance or in shade, obscuring ethnic identities.

## ***(2) Historical reconstructions***

Three historical reconstructions are presented: two sequences set in the nineteenth century and one set in the mid-twentieth century. They differ in cinematic style, allowing the filmmakers to both give the impression of time

passing and to impart disingenuous historical accounts. The reconstructions utilise a combination of voiceover, colour schemes, editing and sophisticated camerawork. Each reconstruction, in particular the first, (following what has until now been a completely contemporary narrative), constitute a narrative and stylistic transition. The beautiful landscapes and vivid tropical colours previously used to evoke the present are replaced by shots of sepia maps and inserts of black and white illustrations. The first sequence – filmed in a mixture of black and white and sepia – is shot and edited at a stately pace that recalls Hollywood films on slavery. It depicts Indians in transport to Mauritius on a ship. Billowing sails, a rickety hull and seemingly half-famished immigrants echo Stephen Spielberg’s *Amistad* (1995). The film uses cinematic imagery traditionally associated with slavery both in the sections depicting slavery *per se* and in those depicting bonded labour. During this first reconstruction, neither the voiceover nor the interviewees simply speak of “Indians” and “immigrants.” The audio and visual *mise en scène* use music to generate impact. The music throughout the film is a mixture of traditional Indian instruments and a more conventional “filmic” score. In the reconstructions, however, the music makes heavy use of percussion; the alien music emphasises the difference between the past and the present in the same way as the shift in visual palette.

Having seen the first Indians transported to Mauritius, we transition to the film’s second reconstruction, showing the ship approaching and unloading its

human cargo. Indian labourers are shown from below, as they ascend the stone steps into Port Louis, creating a visual metaphor of their later ascent. There is now an elision to refer momentarily and unambiguously to slavery although very little time is spent on the subject and this is the last time that slavery *per se* is touched on. Later in this reconstruction – in an abrupt cut implying continuity – we see indentured labours (now clearly identified as such by the voiceover) being abused by an authority figure whose ethnicity is obscured by the colour scheme and by shooting largely in silhouette. His swagger stick and pith helmet invoke the classic archetype of the colonial Westerner. What is arguably a visual deception is accompanied by the voiceover, which refers to “The whip of the colonial masters.” The filmmakers segue to a darker shade at the moment that this “overseer” character is introduced, allowing them to obscure his ethnic identity. The scenes depicting colonial maltreatment are shot in slow motion, creating a feeling of never-ending brutality. While the “overseer” shouts instructions unheard by us, he is shot from a worm’s eye view to imply his dominance – with the sun directly behind him, helping further to obscure his ethnicity (in fact, the job of disciplining labourers was largely delegated to Indian overseers or “Sirdars”). Tilted or “Dutch” angles are used in this and other scenes to create a feeling that the world is out of balance, and generate an impression of unrest.<sup>35</sup>

A third, final historical reconstruction is markedly different in tone and visual palette. It initially uses historical footage of the 1960s independence movement which gives way to a reconstruction of an independence activist speaking to a large Indian audience. The historical footage and the subsequent reconstruction are shot in exactly the same type of newsreel black and white, hinting that the reconstruction is also real historical footage. The film's end credits provide no attribution for this speech, leaving us unclear as to whether it is by an Indian activist of the time or an invention. This speech, authentic or not, connects cultural identity with education and presents them as central to why Indians in Mauritius overcame cultural subjugation. We now turn to how the filmmakers deploy authoritative external voices to underline their thesis.

### **(3) *Interviews***

There are a handful of brief *vox populi* interviews with anonymous people, but the foundation of the film's narrative comes from interviewee identified in superimposed captions. These expert interviewees comprise a well-educated, interlinked group largely predisposed to support the film's thesis. Despite the involvement of some respondents with quite different arguments expressed in print, they speak with a high degree of consistency both with each other and with the overall message. Twenty-six of the 38 experts are almost certainly of Indian descent. Ten interviewees are academics or writers; six of them work as broadcasters and media personalities; the remaining twenty-one are

predominantly corporate or political figures. The interviewees are professionally or personally interested in the island's reputation; indeed, many have been involved in co-creating the official account of the island's past and present. An important exception in relation to slavery is Jacques David, journalist, author of a book on the legacy of Mauritian slavery and member of the Mauritius Truth and Justice Commission.<sup>36</sup> However, his intervention and those of other potentially dissenting experts such as Teelock and Sarup do not significantly change the film's balance. Nor do they nuance the film's interpretation.

The first interviewee describes the importance of the Shivaratri festival to all Mauritians, "especially Hindus." This is Vikash Ramdonee, an academic and trade unionist who has worked as a newscaster and broadcaster for the Mauritian Broadcasting Corporation (MBC). All interviewees endorse and elaborate the unreservedly optimistic account. Ramdonee's interview lays the foundations for this optimistic story, and subsequent interviewees elaborate it. All essentially posit that success lay at the end of a challenging and painful road. Historian Leela Sarup stands next to a monument to indentured labourers (a choice which creates an interesting intertextual relationship, since this section of the film itself might also be considered a monument). Here, Sarup extrapolates from individual anecdotes of success to the all-encompassing, bold statement: "It is truly the indentured labourers who have turned the economic

situation of the world into a prosperous one”. Many of the Indian interviewees who follow Ramdonee talk about the success their predecessors on the island worked towards. Mookhesswur Choonee, Minister of Arts and Culture, discusses how his family path led from his ancestors being labourers to him being a minister via education, a journey, as he puts it, “from Girmitiya to government,” the phrase that gives the documentary its title.

All of the interviewees to this point have told the same story of surprising success: how, then, was it achieved? We are now told the story of a pivotal member of the independence movement and the Labour Party, and its first post-independence Chief Minister and Prime Minister, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam. This account is given by his son, Navinchandra, himself Prime Minister between 2005 and 2014. Navinchandra Ramgoolam tells us that his father’s “upbringing, especially when he was a student in London... imbued him with a sense of justice and fair play.” Here is the answer to the question previously latent in the account: success was a product of a sense of justice in the post-independence ruling elite. We are told that the independence movement (and by implication the subsequent social and political ascent of Mauritian Indians) was the result of the moral compass of a handful of them. In the same sentence we are told that this moral compass was the result of education. Now the film makers begin a narrative detailing the struggle for independence. They first



create an evocative intertextuality by choosing an interviewee who has not only told this story before but has done so to some acclaim.

The novelist Abhimanyu Unnuth, author of the tragic epic novel *Lal Pasina* (translated into French as *Sueurs de Sang: Sweating Blood*) is introduced in a shot of him looking out to sea, writing in his notebook. *Sueurs de Sang* tells the story of labourer Kissan who agitates among the others and, after Kissan is murdered, his son. The book is an emphatically tragic and intense account of the Indian experience described on its blurb as the story of a people “practically enslaved.” “The British wanted to kill our identity,” Unnuth says. Ensuring that subsequent generations spoke their ancestors’ language, he continues, was central to resisting this. The film posits this as another central virtue of Mauritian Indians: fidelity to cultural identity.

The struggle for Indian respect and identity, however, cannot be portrayed in complete isolation from that of other ethnic groups without undermining the film’s intended message of inclusivity. The film now acknowledges that many members of Mauritius’s other racial groups were intimidated, as Mauritian independence approached, by the possibility that *their* cultural identity might be lost. Thus, Franco-Mauritian Jacques DeMarusem says, “We were scared to lose our quality of life. We were scared that they would make us eat with our hands.” DeMarusem, however, is the only non-Indian who we hear articulate this: Creoles are not given voice at this point. The final voiceover statement is

that the fears people had about “Hindu hegemony” turned out to be unfounded. Indian Mauritians, we are being told, are altruistic enough to use that power to create a multicultural society. These implications gain force by being made by co-opting Franco Mauritians.

The other important relationship outlined by interviewees is that between India and contemporary Mauritius. Interviewees employ the language of blood ties. Sir Anerood Jugnauth, Mauritian President (2003-2008), says, “Our relationship, India and Mauritius, is not only one of diplomacy or economic cooperation; it is one of blood.” Several successful Mauritians endorse this broad sentiment, but after a sequence of such interview fragments, the film deploys interviewees to promote Mauritian Indian identity as equivalent to Mauritian identity more widely. The final word on this subject is given to DeMarusem: “Our country today is India.” This final statement emphasises not only the message at the heart of the documentary, but the account which the producers of the “Bridging World” series have attempted to convey throughout the series, in which India is more central than Mauritius.

In sum, the film represents a partisan form of documentary, which advances an argument by all means possible. Its central contention - that Mauritius has evolved into a truly multicultural society, where people of all religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds can co-exist peacefully, equitably and prosperously – is heavily underscored by a wide range of powerful, complementary and potent

techniques that seek to engage the emotions. Its multi-cultural argument is in tension with the Indian ethnic identities of the great majority of those interviewed.

### **An alternative historical interpretation: labour as differential and shared experience**

In this section, we begin by assessing the antecedents of Mauritian success. We indicate a range of factors which have assisted both the Indian majority and the island more widely to reach its current position. Next, we demonstrate that the current state of Mauritius is, in equity terms, intimately linked to its history in two senses. The first is the subject of *suggestio falsi* in the film; the second is simply ignored and is more a case of *suppressio veri*. First, we emphasise the structural differences between slavery and bonded labour, arguing that they generated different secular effects in relation to active citizenship among those subjected to them. However we also suggest that at a more fundamental level the experience of labour generally brought an attitudinal reaction *throughout* the ‘agricultural proletariat’ through an alternative conception of how work and society itself should be organised.<sup>37</sup> In the late 1930s, these attitudes combined with declining living standards among the first generation of workers who were neither slaves nor bonded labourers to create the conditions for mass strikes. That conflict generated a crucial institution-creating moment with long-

term effects in promoting both social equity and democracy: the emergence of a trade union movement with strong links to political parties.

Has Mauritius experienced success and if so, why? Elwyn Chutel, synthesising academic and politicians' views on whether success had in fact occurred, found considerable agreement that it had.<sup>38</sup> Many explanations offered by his respondents point to absences: the lack of a military caste, the tiny potential for territorial disputes with other countries and the absence of widespread corruption. Other scholars argue for the importance of a strong civil service and widespread commitment to parliamentary processes or the alliance between the Indian political elite and the Franco-Mauritian industrial and financial class since independence.<sup>39</sup> It is also widely accepted that external relations played a major role. Pursuing "quiet diplomacy" with an unusual group of ex-imperial nations and more widely ensured the maintenance of vital international trade links, allowing Mauritius to diversify its economy.<sup>40</sup>

Chutel also noted vociferous protest from a minority of politicians of non-Indian origin who felt that social success had in fact been limited.<sup>41</sup> These respondents drew attention to the persistence of the Creoles' poor position. Some also noted that "success" has long been very unevenly distributed even within the supposedly homogenous Indian ethnic group. The Indian community has long been highly internally differentiated. Some of its wealthy families had

been involved in both slavery and bonded labour. In the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, an Indian mercantile elite developed, referred to admiringly by the Victorian vicar Patrick Beaton as “a fine race, the mercantile aristocracy of India and the East”.<sup>42</sup> This elite, along with the Franco-Mauritian planters, owned Indian as well as African slaves<sup>43</sup>. The North Indian trading Indians presented themselves to the British Governors and to India as representatives of the Indian community.<sup>44</sup> Indentured labourers were linked to them through vertical communal institutions but were also separated from them by marked caste and linguistic differences.<sup>45</sup> Since independence, the Indian commercial elite has profited extensively from the development of financial services on the island and through joint ventures with Indian companies.<sup>46</sup> An Indian middle class predominates in the civil service and the professions.<sup>47</sup> Yet many of the descendants of bonded labourers, especially women, currently compete with Creoles for low-paid jobs. Employment for women is characterised by “poor working conditions, long hours and oppressive environments”.<sup>48</sup> This is especially the case in the island’s Export Processing Zone (EPZ). Widely hailed as a success for the Mauritian economy, the EPZ, which covers the whole island, has been built on low paid work by many poor Creole and Indian women.<sup>49</sup>

If Indians generally have experienced mixed fortunes, the position of slave descendants has been more uniformly problematic.<sup>50</sup> It has been suggested that their relative position has worsened since independence.<sup>51</sup> Their working, housing and living conditions are poor, and they no political party represents their interests beyond the small organisation *Les Verts Fraternels*.<sup>52</sup> Their ethnic heterogeneity in a society in which Hindu ideas of ethnic purity are current have made it difficult for them to develop and assert collective identities and hence aggregate and represent their interests.<sup>53</sup> In many cases, they have lost the small plots of land that they began to cultivate in the early Nineteenth Century.<sup>54</sup> Both Creoles themselves, as well as others, refer to 'Le Malaise Créole' to describe their feelings.<sup>55</sup>

The differing fates of the two groups have been linked to the structural differences between slavery and bonded labour, the increasing divergence between their experiences across time and their legacies.<sup>56</sup> There were in fact both divergent and shared features of the two experiences. The conditions experienced by bonded labourers were harsh and in some respects similar to those of slaves, but the framework within which they laboured was structurally different. Bonded labourers' conditions of work were indeed inhuman, partly because of the intense work discipline practised on plantations. They were subjected to violence and abuse, often went unpaid, worked unremittingly long days doing repetitive, physically demanding agricultural work and were badly

fed.<sup>57</sup> The labourers' overseers were Indian *Sirdars*, whom a summary of respondents' views expressed to the Mauritian Truth and Justice Commission described as: "rude, exploitative, dishonest and dominating".<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, unlike slaves, bonded labourers were free to move on at the end of their three-year contracts (which they were able in the 1850s to reduce to one year); their condition was not hereditary and they were free to marry and have children. Also unlike slaves, they were not subjected to forced religious conversion and were left free to practice their religions. Nor were bonded labourers forced to abandon their mother tongue; Megan Vaughan stresses how slaves' transformation to Creole identity was imposed and that the island was "hardly the melting pot of multiculturalist dreams".<sup>59</sup> Crucially, Indians were regarded by the colonial elites as free citizens with rights, which, as we show below, they exercised. They were conscious of their "place as an integral part of the body politic".<sup>60</sup> Slave descendants were in Beaton's view very different; they had been oppressed by the experience of having been reduced to property. In the late 1930s, they momentarily demonstrated that they had a capacity for organised revolt. Yet slave descendants continue to be regarded as a "residual" group, with lower levels of engagement in the public sphere, albeit punctuated by sporadic rebellion.<sup>61</sup>

Mauritian slavery was not, as was initially suggested by Karl Noël, a 'mild' form of servitude.<sup>62</sup> As Richard Allen suggests, the grounds for this thesis were

flimsy: local slave mortality rates were high.<sup>63</sup> Vaughan characterises it as representing “the epitome of evil” for British abolitionists.<sup>64</sup> Mauritian slavery under French rule was formally governed by Colbert’s *Code Noir* and its highly oppressive terms were vigorously enforced by the French colonists; the horrifying resulting treatment of slaves on the island under its terms have been graphically described.<sup>65</sup> Local slavery, according to the knowledgeable and insightful Beaton, rendered Creoles unmotivated to develop themselves through education especially since their masters were positively opposed to it.<sup>66</sup>

The implementation of slavery’s abolition was protracted and ambivalent and played a role in continuing the oppression post-formal abolition. Planter elites throughout the Empire were strongly anti-abolition and followed a determined policy of delay and procrastination.<sup>67</sup> Abolition was delayed, dashing the slaves’ initial hopes; the slave owners also attempted to circumvent it. In order to buy the slave owners’ acceptance of abolition, the compensation approach was agreed upon in the name of the need to develop the colonies and in particular to “educate” the ex-slaves.<sup>68</sup> In fact, compensation brought no hint of such an outcome. After an initial period of ‘apprenticeship’ immediately after abolition, ostensibly designed to ease their transition to free labour but during which nothing was done to assist the “apprentices”, the planters initially imported slaves from French Réunion where slavery remained legal.<sup>69</sup> The ex-



slave owners were compensated for the loss of their property.<sup>70</sup> Ex-slaves were cast on to an unforgiving colonial labour market.<sup>71</sup> As in the USA, slavery had a strong ethnic dimension and underlying negative ethnic attitudes persisted and possibly hardened. Ex-slaves and their descendants were regarded as ‘inferior’ to those of Indian descent by many British commentators, an attitude still in evidence in the 1930s<sup>72</sup>. The ex-slaves and their descendants sometimes did manage to obtain employment on the plantations and later in Port Louis’ docks. They also took up a variety of other occupations on the margins of the economic mainstream. These included fishing and agriculture on small plots of land which they had acquired but were later unable to defend against others’ claims due to legal changes and difficulty in advancing their cases at law.<sup>73</sup>

As we suggested above, there was also a shared, class experience. Resistance was a marked feature of colonial Mauritius’ history, partly the product of its stark social structure. Mauritius was-- until independence began to change the situation--dominated by a mass of agricultural workers initially comprised of slaves and then an agricultural proletariat on the one hand, facing the Franco-Mauritian plantocracy on the other.<sup>74</sup> Markedly hierarchical social relations underpinned by sharp linguistic and cultural differences brought a reaction from below. Under colonial rule, slaves, bonded labourers and even some whites all showed tendencies towards resistance and organisation both inside and outside of governmentally-designated structures for complaint and protest, and this

tradition lives on in popular memory.<sup>75</sup> Many scholarly works refer to acts of resistance and their significance. Problems with hostile maroons had plagued the Dutch and caused them to leave the island; levels of maroonage later remained high among both slaves and bonded labourers.<sup>76</sup> Ex-slave “apprentices” had a strong desire to free themselves rather than wait to be freed, and made efforts to secure manumission; they “never bowed their heads and accepted their fate silently”.<sup>77</sup> Bonded labourers were portrayed in the mid-Nineteenth Century by Beaton as people of a much more assertive character than their compatriots who stayed behind in India.<sup>78</sup> Employers complained of high volumes of illegal absence from work across the Nineteenth Century.<sup>79</sup> Legal cases brought by workers against employers, petitions and appeals to both local and imperial authorities were very common.<sup>80</sup> Over 10,000 complaints against employers and overseers were lodged with the authorities between 1860 and 1899.<sup>81</sup> A mass petition collected locally and sent to Queen Victoria in 1871 resulted in a Royal Commission and significant reform.<sup>82</sup> As outlined above, the tradition of resistance and collective organisation from below have been vividly represented and relayed in a series of Indo-Mauritian novels, drawing on oral as well as documentary sources.

A century after slavery’s abolition and a generation after the ending of bonded labour, the creation through a mass upsurge of an institutionalised

labour movement marked an important departure. In 1937-8, massive strikes broke out in the sugar plantations involving predominantly Indian and then Creole dock workers, marked, as the colony's Governor noted, by "class hatred of considerable vehemence".<sup>83</sup> The agitators deemed responsible for harnessing this hatred were a group around the rural Doctor Curé and his lieutenant Jacques Anquetil.<sup>84</sup> Importantly, they initially formed neither a trade union nor a political party, but rather a fusion of the two which insisted on a non-ethnic, non-caste and secular basis for membership and action.<sup>85</sup> This revolt led the Governor – in the face of stern Franco-Mauritian opposition – to enact the first trade union ordinance in the British Empire's plantation colonies.<sup>86</sup> The resultant unions were enterprise-based and later developed a range of federations affiliated to a range of reformist political parties, providing the latter with a mass basis since union membership has long been at levels typical of industrialised countries.<sup>87</sup> The unions played a significant role in the independence movement, providing the intellectual nationalists with a mass base.<sup>88</sup> After independence, and especially during the 1970s, widespread industrial action was suppressed and regulated, driving unions to focus on political channels even more sharply than hitherto to represent their members' interests.<sup>89</sup> This contributed to political parties' building increasingly hybrid ethnic bases.<sup>90</sup> The unions simultaneously provided a model of a non-ethnic democratic institution and played a role in developing a social democratic

consensus between parties. Those of Indian descent featured strongly in them, but other ethnic groups also participated.<sup>91</sup>

Thus, the development of a class-based labour movement after the abolition of bonded labour in the early Twentieth Century reflected the widespread popular conviction of the need for voice and equity at work and in society. For all those at the bottom of society, continued difficulties have been mitigated by social democratic measures since independence. The institution of minimum wages, a welfare safety net and the provision of free health and education are significant for these people.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, until the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a sustained reduction in income inequality occurred over a long period. This continued until the end of the trend coincided with a point at which unions became increasingly subject to legal and practical restrictions.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, economic success has allowed very high levels of expenditure on social welfare, education and health systems, demanded by the labour movement as key elements in a social wage.<sup>94</sup> Broadly social democratic thinking has pervaded the island's political parties since independence despite substantial political differences between them.<sup>95</sup> Tripartite institutions currently continue to govern the labour market despite increasing restrictions on unions.<sup>96</sup>

The more overtly political and economic aspects of the development of a social democratic movement (and then state) with strong links between government and civil society have been extensively documented.<sup>97</sup> These

phenomena, as we have illustrated, have deep historic roots. Our key point is that social democratic thinking built on the popular values of voice and equity at work and a long tradition of worker self-activity which emerged from the mid-Nineteenth Century onwards. This concerned not simply the labour market institutions this eventually gave rise to; it was also about the societal values that preceded, underlay them and persist to the present.

## **Conclusion**

We have shown how the significant film under analysis presents a technically powerful ethnic account of Mauritian history which obscures the development of strong values of equity and an early colonial inter-ethnic trade union movement. The film conforms more closely to Rosenstone's conception of an historical documentary that pursues its argument single-mindedly than to Davis' ideal, which requires more assiduous consideration of historical scholarship. It marginalises central issues of equity and class. The narrative of Indian virtues accounting both for that ethnic groups' success, and the conflation of that with the success of Mauritius itself, buttresses the local elite's interests.

Our historical interpretation draws on scholarly accounts but appears distinctive since we are unaware of any comparable synthesis. We argued that Mauritians had a shared core experience of labour and of class domination. The experience underlay the emergence of trade unionism and the island's social democratic consensus which has limited the damage wrought on those at the bottom of

society. A demand for voice and equity at work and in society grew from deep historic roots in the experience of labour shared by many Indians and Creoles even though slavery and bonded labour differed in important respects. This was reflected in early and widespread trade unionism in African and indeed British colonial terms, which became unusually intimately linked to the political parties. Strong links between the labour movement's industrial and political institutions combined with and played into the awareness of the political elite in the immediate post-independence period that national cohesion required a certain sensitivity to social equity issues. Although later weakened, this proved sufficient to contain ethnic tensions to brief periodic eruptions of protest and counter-protest.

The wider significance of our analysis may be that this film reflects a wider tendency internationally, which emphasises ethnicity and identity while ignoring class relations. It promotes the impression that the current state of Mauritius is not the result of negotiated political processes but rather of one group's 'innate' ethnic qualities. We suggest that, both here and more generally, ethnic identity and cultural approaches require dialogue with cross-ethnic and class analysis if holistic and accurate accounts are to be achieved. Labour history should be given full weight within such a synthesis.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Davis, *Slaves on Screen*, 15.
- <sup>2</sup> Boswell, *Malaise Creole*, 209-211; Mauritius TJC, Vol. 1: 4 and *passim*.
- <sup>3</sup> Brown, *Global South Asians*, 31.
- <sup>4</sup> Davis, *Slaves on Screen*, 10.
- <sup>5</sup> Darga, "Autonomous Development," 9.
- <sup>6</sup> Leys, *Development Theory*.
- <sup>7</sup> Gilbert, "Megan Vaughan Review," 109-111.
- <sup>8</sup> Mauritius TJC, Vol. 4, 551.
- <sup>9</sup> Allen, *Slaves and Freedmen*, 16; Stanziani, *Bondage*, 194.
- <sup>10</sup> Vaughan, *Creole Island*.
- <sup>11</sup> Mauritius TJC, Vol. 1, 59-75.
- <sup>12</sup> Allen, *Slaves and Freedmen*, 16.
- <sup>13</sup> Stanziani, *Bondage*, 193.
- <sup>14</sup> Tinker, *New System of Slavery*.
- <sup>15</sup> Lincoln, "Beyond the Plantation."
- <sup>16</sup> Sandbrook, Edelman, Heller and Teichman, *Social Democracy*, 123-146.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> Boswell, *Malaise Creole*, 205-208 and *passim*.
- <sup>19</sup> Government of Mauritius, TJC Act, 13(4); Croucher, Houssart and Michel, "Legitimacy, Political Negotiation."
- <sup>20</sup> Mauritius TJC, 2011, Vol.1, chapter 8 and *passim*; Boswell, *Malaise Creole*, 11.
- <sup>21</sup> Mauritius TJC, Vol. 1, 2.
- <sup>22</sup> Boswell, *Malaise Creole*, 1-13.
- <sup>23</sup> Mauritius TJC, Vol. 1, 1-5.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> Low, "Les Enjeux Actuels," 402-403.
- <sup>26</sup> Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 250.
- <sup>27</sup> Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 16.

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- <sup>28</sup> Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation*, 20-21; Ludvigsson, "Historian Film-Maker's Dilemma," 65.
- <sup>29</sup> Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 80, 83.
- <sup>30</sup> Davis, *Slaves on Screen*, 130 and *passim*.
- <sup>31</sup> Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation*; Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*.
- <sup>32</sup> Davis, *Slaves on Screen*.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Davis, *Slaves on Screen*, 12.
- <sup>35</sup> Cousins, *Story of Film*, 196.
- <sup>36</sup> David, *Slave Legacy*.
- <sup>37</sup> Joos, "Mauritius."
- <sup>38</sup> Chutel, "Mauritian Development."
- <sup>39</sup> Mukonoweshuro, "Containing Political Instability"; Sandbrook, Edelman, Heller, and Teichman, "Social Democracy," 123-146.
- <sup>40</sup> Chutel, *Mauritian Development*, 55-6.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid, 45-48.
- <sup>42</sup> Beaton, *Creoles and Coolies*, 14.
- <sup>43</sup> Vaughan, *Creole Island*.
- <sup>44</sup> Hanoomansingh, "Chota Bharat."
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Boswell, *Malaise Creole*, 131.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>50</sup> Mauritius TJC, Vol. 1, 1-5.
- <sup>51</sup> Low, "Les Enjeux Actuels."
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>53</sup> Boswell, *Malaise Creole*, 1-14.
- <sup>54</sup> Mauritius TJC, Vol. 1, 347-348.
- <sup>55</sup> Boswell, *Malaise Creole*, 1.
- <sup>56</sup> Stanziani, *Bondage*, 191; Mauritius TJC, Vol. 1, 1-5 and *passim*.
- <sup>57</sup> Mauritius TJC, Vol. 1, 2 and *passim*.
- <sup>58</sup> Mauritius TJC, Vol. 3, 333.
- <sup>59</sup> Vaughan, *Creole Island*, 113; 121.
- <sup>60</sup> Beaton, *Creoles and Coolies*, 207.
- <sup>61</sup> Boswell, *Malaise Creole*.
- <sup>62</sup> Noël, *L'Esclavage*.
- <sup>63</sup> Allen, *Slaves and Freedmen*, 13-14.
- <sup>64</sup> Vaughan, *Creole Island*, 261.
- <sup>65</sup> Michel, *Descendants of Slaves*. Teelock, *Bitter Sugar*.
- <sup>66</sup> Beaton, *Creoles and Coolies*, 252-253.



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- <sup>67</sup> Beauvois, *Indemniser Les Planteurs*, 210-215.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid, 164-169.
- <sup>69</sup> Allen, *Slaves and Freedmen*; Michel, *Descendants of Slaves*. Teelock, *Bitter Sugar*.
- <sup>70</sup> Beauvois, *Indemniser Les Planteurs*.
- <sup>71</sup> Low, "Les Enjeux Actuels"; Mauritius TJC Vol. 1, 2.
- <sup>72</sup> Croucher and McIlroy, "Mauritius 1938."
- <sup>73</sup> Mauritius TJC, Vol. 1, 3-4; Vol. 4, 396.
- <sup>74</sup> Joos, "Mauritius."
- <sup>75</sup> Allen, *Slaves and Freedmen*, 55-78; Vaughan, *Creole Island*; Boswell, *Malaise Creole*; Mauritius TJC.
- <sup>76</sup> Allen, *Slaves and Freedmen*, 55.
- <sup>77</sup> Mauritius TJC, Vol. 4, 200.
- <sup>78</sup> Beaton, *Creoles and Coolies*, 207.
- <sup>79</sup> Allen, *Slaves and Freedmen*, 57-59.
- <sup>80</sup> Vaughan, *Creole Island*.
- <sup>81</sup> Allen, *Slaves and Freedmen*, 66.
- <sup>82</sup> Mauritius TJC, Vol. 1, 2-3.
- <sup>83</sup> Croucher and McIlroy, "Mauritius 1938," 6.
- <sup>84</sup> Narain, *Mauritius Labour Party*.
- <sup>85</sup> Ibid; 8-10.
- <sup>86</sup> Croucher and McIlroy "Mauritius 1938."
- <sup>87</sup> Joos, "Mauritius."
- <sup>88</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>89</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>90</sup> Carroll and Carroll, "Accommodating Ethnic Diversity."
- <sup>91</sup> Joos, "Mauritius."
- <sup>92</sup> Lee, "Income Inequality."
- <sup>93</sup> Atkinson and Morelli, *Economic Inequality*; Fashoyin, *Tripartite Institutions*, 11-16.
- <sup>94</sup> Mukonoweshuro, "Containing Political Instability."
- <sup>95</sup> Sandbrook, *Social Democracy*, 123-146; Boswell, *Malaise Creole*, 30-31.
- <sup>96</sup> Fashoyin, *Tripartite Institutions*, 19-20 and *passim*.
- <sup>97</sup> Sandbrook, *Social Democracy*, 123-146.

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